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ABSTRACT

The research aimed to determine instructors' and adult students' perceptions of differences in men and women students' classroom behavior in higher education classes. A questionnaire was developed consisting of items representing classroom behaviors, personal attributes, a measure of overall student participation (not used in this analysis), and questions regarding respondent personal characteristics. A sample was drawn from four institutions: two public community colleges, one in a rural and one in a suburban location; a large private university in a small city; and a small private liberal arts college in a suburban location. Only adult students, defined as age 25 or older, were included in the sample of 200 students. Seven factors were identified which accounted for 54% of the total scale variance. They include verbal participation, learning orientation, dominating others, support seeking, self disclosure, self assurance, and sociability. The findings suggest that overall perceptions of differences in men and women students are small. Neither instructors nor students as a group indicated that women and men varied greatly on any dimension of classroom behavior. Includes 14 references. (JDD)

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PERCEPTIONS OF ADULT MEN AND WOMEN STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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Perceptions of Adult Men and Women Students in Higher Education

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An ongoing concern in education at all levels is fostering an equitable classroom environment for men and women. Research has suggested that students may be treated differently by teachers in response to actual gender-related differences in classroom behavior and as well as beliefs regarding appropriate female and male characteristics; studies also suggest that student interactions may be affected by such beliefs and behaviors. Clarifying gender differences in classroom situations is of great importance due to their potential relationship to achievement and other desirable educational outcomes. While studies have gathered considerable information in classroom settings with younger students, little investigation of how gender might influence the experience of adult students has been undertaken. In this paper, I will describe the preliminary results of a survey research project that sought to identify respondents' perceptions of gender-related classroom behavior; the findings add to our understanding of the significance of gender-related differences from the perspective of adult students and their instructors in higher education.

GENDER-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN CLASSROOM SETTINGS

There has been considerable interest over the past several decades in the study of gender differences in classroom behavior and interaction (for a comprehensive review of studies dealing with elementary and secondary education, see Wilkinson, 1985). In general, research results indicate that male and female behavior does differ in classroom situations; males tend to be more active and assertive while females tend to be more passive and responsive.

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These behaviors affect teacher responses; teachers give more attention and feedback to male students and less to female students (Brophy, 1985). Further, these differences also influence student interactions; for example, in mixed-sex groups males tend to dominate discussion as well as experience more success in getting information from others (Lindow, Marriett, & Wilkinson, 1985). Lower achievement as well as other negative outcomes have been attributed to the different experiences that males and females may have as a result of these classroom interactions.

However, to enhance our understanding of the relationship of gender to educational outcomes, many factors that affect classroom dynamics and student behavior must be clarified. A wide spectrum of variables have been examined for their effect on behavior and outcomes, including other teacher and student characteristics as well as classroom elements. Variables that have received surprisingly limited attention are teacher and student perceptions of gender differences in behavior. Staley and Cohen (1988) point out that perceptions of gender-related differences in behavior can be as important as actual behavior in determining interpersonal interactions. While considerable research has been based on observations of classroom behaviors, there has been less attention devoted to exploring individuals'perceptions and their relationship to other variables.

Perceptions of behavior are potentially significant as indicators of salient actual behavior as well as stereotypes of gender-related characteristics. Extensive study of individual beliefs continue to reveal pervasive stereotypes of typical male and female traits (Williams and Best, 1982). Such stereotypes may influence perceptions; for example, studies indicate that men and women perceive greater differences in communication style between the sexes than actually exists (Jenkins and Kramarae, 1981). Given such

potential discrepancies, it appears important to devote more attention to clarifying perceptions of gender differences in classroom settings.

Both student perceptions as well as those of instructors must be obtained in order to understand classroom interactions. There is evidence that teachers and students perceive the classroom environment differently (Darkenwald, 1987; Karp & Yoels, 1976). Not only will teacher and student behavior be shaped by their perceptions of others; they in turn may influence others by projecting expectations regarding appropriate gender related behavior. Men and women also may have different perceptions of the same classroom situation. For example, a study of perceptions of the adult classroom environment indicated that women perceive more student involvement and affiliation than men (Beer & Darkenwald, 1989). Treichler and Kramarae (1983) suggest that women and men may use and interpret communication strategies differently. It thus seems important to distinguish between the perceptions of men and women as well as students and instructors in research on gender-related behavior.

Little research has focused on the influence of gender in classroom behavior and interactions of adult students. "Nontraditional" students over the age of 25, particularly women, are rapidly becoming the majority in many undergraduate higher education settings. Gender differences may be particularly evident and problematic for these students due to the more traditional socialization of adults and greater entrenchment of gender role expectations and behaviors. Tarule (1988) points out that adult women may have preferences for "connected" learning strategies, such as sharing personal experiences and collaborative discussion, that may be at odds with traditional modes of classroom instruction. Studies of communication styles suggest that differences in adult male and female conversational strategies may lead to "miscommunication" and have a negative impact in classroom settings (Treichler

and Kramarae, 1983). We know little about how such behaviors are perceived by adult students and teachers. In a positive light, the potential for understanding and appreciating gender-related differences among adult students may be great - adult students as well as educators may be more able and motivated than children to identify and if necessary modify their own attitudes, behavior and responses to the behavior of others.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research was to determine instructors' and adult students' perceptions of differences in men and women students' classroom behavior in higher education classes. Several specific research objectives were established. First, since no parsimonious framework for understanding the potentially diverse range of relevant classroom behaviors was identified in existing literature, an initial objective was to determine if meaningful categories (factors) of classroom behaviors could be identified. The second objective was to determine the degree to which respondents perceived men and women to differ in the identified classroom behaviors. A third objective was to compare the perceptions of four groups: male and female students; and male and female instructors.

METHODOLOGY

Instrumentation

Questionnaire development. The existing literature suggests a variety of behaviors that differ for men and women in classroom settings. While instruments have measured communicator style, social style, attitudes toward women, and related constructs, there are no existing instruments that assess the variety of relevant classroom behaviors. Accordingly, the first step in this study was to develop a comprehensive survey questionnaire. Items were obtained from two sources: (a) an extensive review of literature on gender-

related differences in behavior, and (b) semistructured interviews with instructors and adult students in undergraduate classes. The interviews confirmed that respondents were able to identify male/female differences in behaviors. The initial item pool was refined and reduced several times through the elimination of redundant, inappropriate, and idiosyncratic items. Preliminary analysis of the item pool suggested that items could be placed into two general categories: those that represented specific behaviors, such as "responding to teacher questions" or "interacting with other students," and those that represented generalized behavior-related traits such as self-confidence or competitiveness. Since perceptions of generalized traits may be related to perceptions of specific behaviors, it was considered valuable and appropriate to include both on the questionnaire (to simplify discussion, the items as a whole will be referred to as "behaviors' unless the groups of items are described separately).

A refined pool of 57 items were used to construct an initial version of the instrument. This version was administered individually to 12 students and instructors who provided feedback on the format and items. Based on their feedback a revised 54-item pilot questionnaire was constructed. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 60 students and 15 teachers; these individuals completed the survey in class sessions, and were asked to provide feedback on the format and content of the instrument. Three criteria were used with the pilot data to evaluate, revise and eliminate scale items: high intercorrelations (above .65) between individual items; low corrected item-to-total scale correlations (below .30) and high proportion (more than 30%) of "nn" responses. "Nn" responses represent a response category labelled "never noticed." This response category was provided for each item to allow respondents to indicate lack of awareness of the behavior, rather than to select a possibly random response. While the 30% criterion permitted the

retention of items with a relatively high number of nn responses, examination of frequency distributions indicated that some respondents perceived differences between male/female behavior on all retained items. It was considered desirable to keep these items with potential gender differences for further analysis with a larger sample in the final study. Application of all criteria to the pilot data resulted in the elimination of 10 items from the scale.

Format of the questionnaire. The final questionnaire consisted of four sections: (a) items representing classroom behaviors; (b) items representing relevant personal attributes; (c) a measure of overall student participation (not used in this analysis), and (d) questions regarding respondent personal characteristics. Questionnaire instructions request that respondents base their responses on their perceptions of students in the course in which they complete the survey. In the first section, respondents are asked to indicate on six point Likert-type scales how often men and women exhibit each identified behavior. In the second section, they are asked to indicate the degree to which each attribute describes men and women students. As on the pilot version, a response category was included for respondents to indicate that they were not aware of the behavior. A sample item from the first section is provided below:

	Never					Often	Never Noticed
In this class how often do:							
_____ ask questions?							
Male students	1	2	3	4	5	6	N
Female students	1	2	3	4	5	6	N

Both a student version and a teacher version were constructed. The first two sections of the questionnaire were identical for both versions. Additional questions were included in the third section of the teacher version to obtain information about subject matter, size and gender composition of the class. Questions regarding personal characteristics were also somewhat different for teachers and students.

Sampling and Data Collection

Data was collected in Fall 1989 and Spring 1990. The target population for the study included instructors and adult students in undergraduate courses. A primary consideration in selecting the sample was to identify respondents in courses composed primarily of adult students, who for the purposes of the study, were defined as students 25 years of age or older. A convenience sample was drawn from four institutions: two public community colleges, one in a rural and one in a suburban location; a large private university in a small city; and a small private liberal arts college in a suburban location. College administrators identified courses with high proportions of adult students. Course instructors were contacted individually and asked to participate in the study. Questionnaires were completed anonymously by instructors and students during class sessions. All students, regardless of age, were invited to participate in the survey; age information requested on the questionnaire permitted later identification and elimination of respondents who did not meet the study's definition of adult students.

Students and instructors in a total of 33 classes completed the questionnaire. Respondents were eliminated from the sample if their responses to more than one quarter of the questionnaire items fell into the nn category (never noticed); this step was necessary for this particular analysis to permit a valid overall assessment of perceptions across general dimensions of

behavior. The final sample consisted of 358 students and 30 instructors. Females comprised 58.6% of the student sample and 53.3% of the instructors. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 75 with a mean age of 28.4 years. The instructors ranged in age from 23 to 60 with a mean age of 43.5 years. Class data indicated that the highest proportion of respondents were in social science classes (29.1%), followed by business-related classes (26.5%), classes in the humanities (23.7%), and math/science classes (16.2%).

Since with the exception of the first objective, the purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of adult students, only individuals who met the criterion described above (age 25 or older) were included in a subsample of adult students. The adult student sample consisted of 200 students, with a mean age of 34.7 years. This subgroup included a slightly higher proportion of women (63.5%) than did the sample as a whole. The proportions in social science (27.5%), business-related (27.5%), humanities (22.0%), and math/science classes (19.5%) were comparable to the group as a whole.

Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, data for individual items was examined for high proportions of nn (never noticed) responses. A higher criterion than in the pilot study was established for elimination of such items to permit appropriate analysis. Five items were identified with nn for more than 15% of the total number of observations; these items were deemed invalid and dropped from subsequent analyses. Therefore, the total number of scale items became 39. One of the most conservative methods of handling missing data, mean impletion, was used to correct remaining missing values for factor analysis. Item means were calculated and impleted separately for four subgroups: female students, male students, female instructors, and male instructors.

To achieve the first research objective, questionnaire data from the total sample of respondents were utilized. Since this objective was to identify underlying dimensions of student classroom behavior without respect to gender, it was necessary to pool data for male and female behavior on each item. Accordingly, questionnaire data from each respondent (or observation) was divided into two observations, or sets of responses: one observation consisted of respondent data for male behavior on each item and the second observation consisted of data for female behavior on each item. This step resulted in a total of 776 observations (388 x 2) as the data base for exploratory factor analysis. Co-efficient alpha for the scale, based on this set of observations, was .93, indicating acceptable overall reliability.

Factor solutions with two through nine factors were generated, based on both orthogonal and oblique rotations.Several statistical indicators were used to guide the selection of an optimal solution, including the Kaiser criterion and an examiniation of a scree plot of eigenvalues. The ultimate criterion for selection of a solution was the conceptual meaningfulness of the factors.

The sample of instructors and adult students was used as the data base for the attainment of the remaining research objectives. Because it was considered most useful and appropriate to draw conclusions based on perceptions of broad categories of behavior rather than for the large number of individual behaviors, factor scores on the identified factors were generated and used as the basis for analysis of perceived male/female differences. Factor scores were calculated separately for perceptions of both male and female behaviors using simple additive indices. To achieve the second objective, a *t*-test for paired samples used to assess the extent of perceived male/female differences on each factor for the sample as a whole. A significance level of .007 (estimated using Bonferonni's additive inequality) was set to diminish the possibility of a Type

I error. The third objective required the calculation of mean male/female difference scores on each factor for four subgroups: adult male students, adult female students, male instructors, and female instructors. Perceptions of (a) male vs. female students and (b) female vs. male instructors were tested for significant differences with the t-test, again using the .007 level of significance. Due to the great discrepancy in the numbers of students and instructors, statistical tests of differences in the perceptions of these respondent groups were not considered appropriate.

FINDINGS

Dimensions of Classroom Behavior

Eight factors met the Kaiser criterion for retention (an eigenvalue greater than 1.0). A scree plot of the eigenvalues was inconclusive, suggesting several possible solutions. Examination of the eight factor solution revealed one factor with a single item above the loading criterion of .45 that was conceptually ambiguous, and thus it was not deemed acceptable. All factors in the seven factor solution were readily interpretable; therefore this solution was considered preferable to solutions with fewer numbers of factors as a means of providing the most comprehensive categories of behavior. Due to the high number of cross-loading items in the oblique seven factor solution, the orthogonal solution was selected to provide the most conceptually distinct categories. This solution included only two items that loaded above .45 on more than one factor; one item did not load above this criterion on any factor. The seven factors accounted for 54% of the total scale variance. The items, item loadings and scale reliabilities for each factor are presented in Table 1; a brief description of each is provided below.

[insert Table 1 here]

Factor 1, labelled Verbal Participation, consists of items that refer to involvement in class discussions, answering and asking questions, or other forms of verbal communication. The highest loading items on the second factor, Learning Orientation, reflect positive attitudes or feelings about learning. Other items seem to relate to how an individual handles the task of learning (i.e., organization, concern with details). Two characteristics that loaded on this factor, polite and well-spoken, have a less obvious relationship to other items, but also suggest generally positive traits related to learning in the classroom. The third factor, Dominating Others, included items that refer to efforts to assert authority over the teacher or other students. Support-Seeking, the fourth factor, was comprised of items representing attempts to gain assistance from other students or the teacher, both directly and indirectly (taking notes). Factor 5, Self-Disclosure, included items referring to a tendency to express personal concerns or emotions. Factor 6 was labelled Self-Assurance to reflect the characteristic underlying all items loading on this factor; these items were all attributes that suggest confidence in personal ability. The last factor, Sociability, included items relating to an individual's orientation towards interpersonal relationships.

Perceived Differences in Male/Female Behaviors

Table 2 presents means and standard deviations for perceived male and female behavior on each factor, difference scores, and t values for the difference scores, using the combined data from adult students and instructors. As the table reveals, women were given significantly higher ratings on five of the factors; no significant difference was perceived in male/female behavior on Factor 3, Dominating Others, and Factor 6, Self-Assurance. It should be noted,

however, that while statistically significant, the actual difference scores were relatively low.

[insert Table 2 here]

Perceptions of Four Subgroups: Male and Female Students and Instructors

Mean difference scores and *t* values on each factor for male students and female students are presented in Table 3. Results of the *t*-test indicated significant differences between female students and male student respondents' perceptions of differences between men and women on Verbal Participation, Learning Orientation, Support Seeking, and Self Disclosure. Female student respondents perceived greater differences and rated women more highly than men on each of these factors. Table 4 presents difference scores and *t* values for male instructors and female instructors. No significant difference was found between male and female instructors' perceptions of gender differences on any factor. In general, mean difference scores of all groups were similar. Interestingly, male student respondents were the only group to rate men more highly than women on any factor: they rated men slightly higher on Self Assurance; a *t* test for paired comparisons indicated that this mean score was significantly different from zero at the $p<.0001$ level.

[insert Tables 3 and 4 here]

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that overall perceptions of differences in men and women students are small. Neither instructors nor students as a group indicated that women and men varied greatly on any dimension of classroom behavior. However, the extent to which even the perceptions of slight differences discovered here affect classroom interactions and ultimately educational outcomes deserves further exploration. Accordingly, the general nature of these differences and their potential implications should be noted.

The data do not indicate that perceptions of students of one gender are consistently more favorable than perceptions of the other gender. The sample as a whole rated women slightly higher than men on Verbal Participation and Learning Orientation, behaviors that might contribute to positive perceptions of women as students. The finding that men were not perceived to be more verbally active or self-assured than women would seem to contradict research suggesting that men tend to dominate group interactions. Perhaps adult women students were particularly comfortable with participation in the sample of classrooms in this study; a sample with higher proportions of classes in areas such as math/science, still dominated by men, might yield different perceptions of behavior. Women were also rated more highly on Support Seeking and Self Disclosure, behaviors that could convey less positive images of student competence. Along with the higher ratings of women on Sociability, these findings seem to offer some support for the assertion of Gilligan (1982) and others that women are more relationship oriented than men; and further, that they are more likely to seek personal involvement in learning situations (Belenky et al., 1986). How these combinations of characteristics might relate to educational achievement or other outcomes for adult students remains to be determined.

The study results also indicate that students' perceptions of other students may be somewhat affected by gender of the perceiver; women students did perceive slightly greater differences on some factors than did men. Several possible reasons for this finding may be suggested. One explanation may be that such perceptions are affected by actual differences in student interaction. For example, women may be more likely to share personal problems with other women than with men, thus leading to women's higher ratings of women in comparison to men on Self Disclosure. Women may also be more likely to approach other women

students for support, thus contributing to their higher male/female difference scores on Factor 4, Support Seeking. In addition, if women are more likely to request academic assistance from other women, this may contribute to women's perceptions of greater differences between men and women on Learning Orientation, which includes items pertaining to seriousness about coursework and motivation to learn.

The lack of a significant difference between the perceptions of male and female instructors seems to indicate that actual male/female student behavior is not consistently related to instructor gender - at least not in ways observable by the instructors. Since earlier research has indicated that in female-taught classes, men and women participated equally, while in male-taught classes men's interactions were considerably more frequent than women's (Treichler & Kramarae, 1983), this finding merits more investigation.

These overall perceptions of generally small or nonexistent gender-related differences do not suggest that there is little need to help both instructors and adult students understand and respond to potential differences in a positive way. As pointed out earlier, it is difficult to determine at what point perceived differences affect classroom interactions and educational outcomes. Also, initial interviews as well as variations among the survey responses indicate that some individuals do perceive more substantial differences between male and female behavior. Instructors may need to become aware that men and women students vary in their perceptions of each other and in interactions upon which these perceptions are based. Increased sensitivity to individual student perceptions may assist instructors in promoting positive classroom climates for both men and women.Further, it is not clear to what extent perceptions reflect actual behavior. Hall (1982), who identifies a range of potential differences in male and female classroom behavior, does suggest that both teachers and students may not be fully aware of these behaviors. The

results presented here do indicate that it may be important to help instructors and students become sensitive to these behaviors if they are affecting classroom dynamics in the ways indicated by other studies.

However, the need for such educational interventions must certainly be supported by additional research. As a general assessment of perceptions, the results described here permit only tentative conclusions. Lindow et al. (1985) identify a need for research to generate measures of variables that influence classroom behavior; in addition, they also suggest that such measures be ultimately combined with ethnographic research. A comparision of perceptions with observations of actual classroom behavior of men and women would yield valuable information. Since the instructor sample in this study was small, a survey of a larger number of instructors of adult students is particularly important to verify their perceptions. In fact, changing social roles for women, the increasing numbers of adult women entering higher education programs, and changes in attitudes toward gender differences may already be contributing to equitable classroom experiences for adult women and men - or they may serve to conceal ongoing, more subtle inequities. While this study demonstrates that perceptions of comparable behavior exist, there is much more to be learned about the significance of gender in the experiences of adult students.

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Table 3

Perceptions of Male and Female Student Behavior: Comparison of Mean Difference Scores for Male and Female Student Respondents.

	Male Students (N=73)		Female Students (N=127)		T
Factors	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	
F1: Verbal Participation	-.13	(.78)	-.72	(1.22)	-4.17**
F2: Learning Orientation	-.35	(.44)	-.67	(0.68)	-4.14**
F3: Dominating Others	.08	(.69)	-.11	(0.97)	-1.66
F4: Support Seeking	-.30	(.57)	-.66	(0.71)	-3.89**
F5: Self Disclosure	-.69	(.76)	-1.13	(1.13)	-3.30*
F6: Self-Assurance	.20	(.73)	-.07	(1.06)	-2.16
F7: Sociability	-.62	(.76)	-.71	(1.03)	-0.71

*P <.007
**P<.0001

Note: Mean ratings of female behavior were subtracted from ratings of male behavior. A negative diference score indicates that women were rated as more frequently exhibiting the identified behavior.

Table I continued

Item text	Loading
FACTOR 4: Support-Seeking	
Seek teacher's approval	.62
Ask other students for help	.59
Seek teacher support	.57
Take notes	.49
Seek clarification of assignments	.45
FACTOR 5: Self-Disclosure	
Discuss personal problems	.66
Emotional	.63
Express feelings	.61
Share personal experiences	.51
FACTOR 6: Self-Assurance	
Confident	.72
Assertive	.68
Competitive	.65
Argumentative	.48
FACTOR 7: Sociability	
Friendly	.67
Develop friendships with other students	.63
Sensitive to others feelings	.53
Interact with classmates	.50

Table I

Student Classroom Behavior: Seven Factors

Item text	Loading
FACTOR 1: Verbal Participation	
Participate actively in discussions	.74
Answer questions posed by teacher	.70
Ask questions	.70
Initiate discussions	.66
Dominate discussions	.64
Express opinions	.59
Share personal experience	.50
Give positive feedback to the teacher	.49
FACTOR 2: Learning Orientation	
Serious About Coursework	.75
Motivated to learn	.71
Enthusiastic about learning	.70
Well organized	.68
Concerned about details	.65
Concerned about grades	.63
Polite	.59
Well-spoken	.55
FACTOR 3: Dominating Others	
Criticize the teacher	.70
Interrupt the teacher	.66
Disagree with the teacher	.63
Impress other students	.61
Interrupt other students	.59
Give advice to other students	.48
Argumentative	.46

Table 2

Perceptions of Male and Female Student Behavior: Comparison of Mean Scores for Total Sample. (N=230)

Factors	Male Behavior M	(SD)	Female Behavior M	(SD)	Difference M	(SD)	T
F1: Verbal Participation	3.86	(.94)	4.34	(.88)	-.48	(1.10)	-6.62*
F2: Learning Orientation	4.34	(.69)	4.87	(.58)	-.54	(.62)	-13.16*
F3: Dominating Others	2.88	(.98)	2.93	(.91)	-.06	(.87)	-1.03
F4: Support Seeking	3.90	(.79)	4.43	(.71)	-.53	(.67)	-11.94*
F5: Self-Disclosure	2.79	(.87)	3.76	(1.03)	-.94	(1.01)	-14.00*
F6: Self Assurance	4.01	(.86)	4.01	(.79)	.00	(.95)	0.03
F7: Sociability	3.98	(.89)	4.64	(.79)	-.66	(.93)	-11.00*

*p<.0001

Table 4

Perceptions of Male and Female Student Behavior: Comparison of Mean Difference Scores for Male and Female Instructors

Factors	Male Instructors (N=14) M	(SD)	Female Instructors (N=16) M	(SD)	T
F1: Verbal Participation	-.20	(.65)	-.44	(1.19)	-0.70
F2: Learning Orientation	-.47	(.53)	-.40	(.70)	0.32
F3: Dominating Others	-.15	(.42)	-.20	(1.04)	-0.20
F4: Support Seeking	-.64	(.67)	-.42	(.47)	1.06
F5: Self Disclosure	-.37	(.43)	-.99	(1.00)	-2.26
F6: Self Assurance	-.18	(.67)	-.15	(1.06)	0.09
F7: Sociability	-.39	(.43)	-.75	(0.95)	-1.35

Note: Mean ratings of female behavior were subtracted from ratings of male behavior. A negative diference score indicates that women were rated as more frequently exhibiting the identified behavior.